

I've Got Issues: "How can you believe Jesus actually rose from the dead?" (What if it's true??)

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April 4, 2010

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12, 1 Corinthians 15:1-14

"He was crucified, dead and buried" says the creed, but *"On the third day he rose again from the dead!* Think about this! What an astonishing turn of events; this man who was stone cold dead for three days *rose from the grave*; he is risen, alive and well! So we believe and so we proclaim to the world. The resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls with it. Someone has said : *"Belief in the resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith. It is the Christian faith."* [John Stott]

So important is this event, that we Christians are willing to stake everything upon it. If Christ is *not* risen, the Christian message is fatally flawed, Christian faith is utterly without foundation, and all Christian witness is false. If Christ is not risen, Christian forgiveness is a sham and we are still in our sins. If Christ is not risen, Christian burial is a charade and the dead have perished forever; if Christ is not risen then all our labors and hardships endured for Christ will all come to nothing.

As the Apostle Paul put it, *"If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is useless and our faith is in vain."* And we, of all people, are most to be pitied...

"But in fact, Christ did rise from the dead!" says Paul most emphatically. And he preached it wherever he went.

The resurrection was the keynote of the earliest Christian preaching. The disciples sounded the Easter theme again and again. They didn't primarily preach a set of ethical principles or summaries of Jesus' teachings. They didn't proclaim various theories of Jesus' death. They preached *the resurrection*. They simply said to all who would listen: *"It is incredible, but our Lord is alive....He was dead but God raised him and now He lives and all is well! You can know him too! There's a brand new world!"*

The Apostle Paul tells us that this message is "of first importance" and that the risen Lord presented himself alive to Peter, then to his closest followers and later to more than five hundred of his followers all at the same time." And Paul says that he met the living, risen Christ personally. For Paul and the early Christians the resurrection of Christ was a fact, pure and simple; it actually happened!

Are we to believe Paul and the early Christians 20 centuries later? The modern scientific worldview wants to pour cold water on anything that cannot be dissected and analyzed in a laboratory. After all, dead people are not raised to life every day.

And that's the problem for many folks. *"How can you possibly believe Jesus was raised from the dead? We cannot believe this because no one has ever come back from the dead. The dead are dead."* It may be that in their experience thus far no one has ever come back from the dead, but that doesn't mean it couldn't happen – unless of course their worldview doesn't permit it. And that is usually the case. Their worldview would seem to be too narrow.

Over the years, skeptics of Christianity have advanced a number of arguments to explain the resurrection away:

- **Argument #1:** Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead – the disciples only imagined it. They were so anxious to see Jesus alive that they all got caught up in kind of a mass hallucination. **Answer:** The fact is, no one was expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. The disciples were disillusioned and were full of despair. The women went to the tomb to find a dead body. To find Jesus alive would be beyond their wildest imagination.
- **Argument #2:** Someone – grave robbers, the gardeners, the chief priests, who knows who - stole the body. **Answer:** If someone stole the body, how could they do so under the noses of a Roman detachment? And if someone indeed managed to steal the body, all they needed to do to discount the resurrection message proclaimed by the Christians was to produce the body. And, of course, they never did.
- **Argument #3:** One of the crazier arguments advanced says that Jesus didn't really die. Someone gave him a drug that made him look like he was dead, and he revived in the tomb. **Answer:** The problem with this is that Roman execution squads knew how to kill people. They were very skilled and thorough in their work.
- **Argument #4:** And then there is the mistaken tomb theory: the women went to the wrong tomb – a tomb that happened to be empty... or, if they had gone to the right tomb, perhaps they met someone else (perhaps James, Jesus' brother, who looked like him) and in the half-light thought it was Jesus himself. **Answer:** Well, they would have noticed soon enough.
- **Argument #5:** Perhaps most commonly today, people who are sympathetic to religion want to spiritualize the whole story. Jesus was not literally raised from the dead. The story of the resurrection is a simply a metaphor for newness of life. The resurrection of Jesus is a spiritual symbol of life eternal. **Answer:** The problem is that the early Christians believed they actually saw the Risen Jesus. In their experience, the resurrection of Jesus was an actual event, not just a lovely symbol. This "spiritualizing" view doesn't square with the gospel accounts which present the resurrection as a fact – as history.

In the end, we cannot conclusively prove the resurrection to everyone's satisfaction. We cannot subject it to scientific verification. The resurrection by its nature is a unique and unrepeatable – like all historical events. But if you take time to examine the evidence, there are many good reasons to believe. What is it that leads me to believe in the resurrection?

- There is the evidence of the gospel accounts themselves. They are the primary historical sources we have for the life of Jesus. They were written shortly after the events they record, based on eyewitness evidence. Luke, the author of the account we read this morning, is in fact a physician and a very careful historian who did his best to research the facts. Can we not trust him to be somewhat reliable in his accounting? The fact that they each gospel describes the Easter events a bit differently points up the reliability of the testimony. The minor differences are what you

would expect among witnesses at the scene of some significant, shattering event. If the gospel accounts were all harmonized and uniform, you might think the story was fabricated by someone - but such is not the case.

- Not only that, but according to all four gospels *women* are the first witnesses to the resurrection – a fact that no one making up the story would invent. Jewish courts did not even accept the testimony of female witnesses. The fact that women are the first witnesses of the resurrection only points to their authenticity.
- Then, too, why should we doubt the gospel writers and the Apostle Paul? Are they the kind who would deliberately lie? Why should we doubt the early Christians who valued telling the truth and living a life of ethical purity? And why would they put their lives on the line and be willing to die a martyr's death if it was all a lie?
- To me the greatest proof of the resurrection is the transformation of the disciples and the existence of the Christian church. The disciples ran away when the going got tough and hid behind locked doors in the upper room, dispirited and dejected at the death of their master. But then all of sudden we find them out on the streets spreading the good news of the resurrection with courage and joyful abandon. We see the Christian church growing leaps and bounds – spreading all over the world. What happened? Only the reality of Easter and a Living Lord can explain the change.
- What's more, the early church's emphasis on the first day of the week as their special day is very hard to explain unless something striking really did happen then....
- Furthermore, if the resurrection did not happen, chances are we would know very little about Jesus. It's questionable whether we would have the number of written documents about Jesus that exist today. All New Testament accounts are written with Easter in view. It was the resurrection of Jesus that caused people to want to share the good news about Jesus in the first place.

Again, these things do not necessarily “prove” the resurrection. But they are good reasons to believe. Our faith in the Risen Jesus is based on evidence, as far as it goes. Our faith is not irrational or merely a “blind leap.”

Many very intelligent people have thoughtfully and honestly examined the evidence for the resurrection of Christ and have found it utterly convincing.

Perhaps you have heard the story about Frank Morison, who was a famous trial lawyer in England. He had come to the conclusion that the resurrection was nothing but a fairy tale that spoiled the matchless story of a heroic Jesus and he determined to write a book that would discredit the resurrection finally and forever. But when he came to study the facts with care, he had to change his mind, and he wrote his book supporting the other side. His classic book is entitled: Who Moved the Stone? His first chapter is significantly called, "*The Book that Refused to be Written.*"

The same thing happened more recently to Lee Strobel, who was a seasoned reporter for the Chicago Tribune, educated at Yale Law School and an admitted atheist. He decided to go after the biggest story of all - undertaking a research project to determine whether Jesus really was the Son of God. After interviewing dozen's of the country's best scholars, asking hard-nosed questions and carefully examining the evidence for himself, he came to the inescapable conclusion that Jesus was indeed who he said he was. He was persuaded that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. That discovery dramatically changed his life and he is now a committed Christian. He has describes his intellectual and spiritual journey in his book, The Case for Christ, which I commend to you.

So what if all this is true? What would it mean for our world if He is truly risen? What would it mean for you and me?

- If Christ is risen, then we no longer have to fear death; we can look the Grim Reaper squarely in the eye. Death can no longer have power over us. Because Jesus conquered the grave, so shall we. Read the rest of 1 Corinthians 15, the great chapter on the resurrection and let Paul's words fill you with assurance. When our loved ones die, we can know they will be cared for and that God will not allow them to perish. When we die, we die into the loving embrace of Christ. Death does not have the last word.
- If Christ is risen, then evil does not have the last word. The resurrection is a victory of goodness over evil, and love over hatred. We can know that justice will prevail in the end for those who have been grievously wronged in this life.
- If Christ is risen, we know that what we do on this earth matters, that "we labor not in vain." We will persevere in the Lord's work, serving others in his name because what we do matters somehow eternally. We will live for him and honor him in our family life, our work life, our social life.
- If Christ is risen, then we are never alone in the crises of life. He will be with us to help and sustain us in our troubles and when life threatens to overwhelm.
- If Christ is risen, fear and worry and anxiety depart; peace, love, joy rule in their stead, and our lives are transformed for the better.

What would it mean for our world – for you and me- if Christ actually rose from the dead? Everything! Absolutely everything!

The fact is, Christ *is* risen from the dead! Believe it! It's true! It's the most important news in all of history, the best news anyone could hope to receive. Check it out for yourself. Maybe we should follow the example of Peter after hearing the women testify to the empty tomb and the Risen Lord. While his fellow disciples thought it all seemed like "idle nonsense," he ran to the tomb to see for himself. Exercise your brain and examine the evidence. Open your mind and your heart. It just might change your life forever – and all for the better!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!